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Title: Tobacco's decline bringing demise of grower group

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For Will Edd Clark, the demise of the Western Dark Fired Tobacco Growers' Association is like a death in the family.

"I've done this for so long it's kind of part of me," said Clark, 58. "I have two ladies who work for me, and it's going to be even harder for them."

Clark spent the last 26 years as general manager of the organization, which promoted crops, lobbied and administered the federal price-support system that Congress abolished about 18 months ago. Even before the buyout, most growers had opted to sell directly to companies. Now with the end of the auction system, the association has outlived its usefulness.

"I know there are some farmers out there that think it's a mistake to close it down," Clark said. "But the directors thought it was best, and that's what we're going to do."

The board decision came nearly a year ago, but Clark and his two-woman staff will need through the end of 2007 to close down the association.

They must distribute about \$100,000 back to 200 to 250 farmers who paid into a fund to protect taxpayers against losses that might have resulted from the price-support program. The money will be returned to those who grew dark air-cured tobacco during 2002, 2003 or 2004. Farmers have until March 31 to provide the cooperative with buyout forms from the Farm Service Agency.

Another task is to sell the Murray office and warehouse, and return farmers' shares of those assets. Growers who haven't signed membership verification forms are asked to do so immediately to receive their portion.

"I found out there's a whole lot more to closing an organization down than there is to running one," Clark said.

Founded in 1931 along with the Depression-era price-support system, the association took

on more promotional and migrant-recruiting work in recent years.

While burley tobacco is grown for smoking, dark tobacco is produced for moist snuff. Virtually all the nation's dark leaf comes from western Kentucky and northwest Tennessee in a narrow band west of Owensboro. Graves and Calloway counties produce 6 million to 7 million of the roughly 32 million pounds grown annually in the two-state area, Clark said.

Even before the buyout, many dark-leaf growers switched from auctioning to contracting because of the good prices offered by snuff companies, he said. The move was slower for burley growers because of weaker prices.

"A lot were already contracting so not many dark growers got out because of the buyout," Clark said. "A lot of people quit burley." Snuff companies now have a competitive advantage over cigarette makers because there are plenty of remaining growers, he said.

"The bottom line is the companies own it all now. They control the price, who they buy from and where it will be grown," Clark said. "I think the growers will eventually need some kind of organization, but it will be different than this one."

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